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March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2011

The Honorable Ken Peterson, Chair, and Members of the House Judiciary Committee:

Dear Chairman Peterson,

On behalf of the Montana American Indian Caucus of the 62<sup>st</sup> Legislature, we voice our support for replacing the death penalty in Montana with life without the possibility of parole.

The U.S. Constitution guarantees fairness and equity before the law and yet one of the death penalty's fatal flaws is the unequal application to people of color and those in poverty. Numerous governmental and non-governmental studies have shown that racial biases permeate our legal system and lead to inequalities in sentencing.

The death penalty disproportionately affects American Indians. A study in 2003 found that a disproportionate 19% of those executed prior to 1994 were American Indians. American Indians make up about 6.5% of Montana's population and yet make up 15% of those who have been sentenced to death in Montana.

The death penalty is also disproportionately applied to low-income people, many of whom are people of color. Defendants who are poor and represented by court-appointed lawyers are more likely to get the death penalty than those who can afford their own expensive legal representation. Such skewed application of justice is part of the reason that 138 Death Row inmates have been found innocent or exonerated since the 1970s.

In addition, the death penalty is much more expensive than life without parole. Every major cost study ever conducted shows that the death penalty system costs taxpayers at least 2 to 3 times more than a system of life without parole. The majority of that cost is incurred during the initial trial, whether or not the defendant is sentenced to death.

Finally, the death penalty prolongs pain for victims' families, dragging them through an agonizing and lengthy process that holds out the promise of an execution at the beginning but often results in a different sentence in the end. A life without parole sentence, on the other hand, begins as soon as victims' families leave the courtroom and is served anonymously, outside the spotlight of the media cameras.

The American Indian Caucus asks the Senate Judiciary Committee to strongly consider supporting the bill replacing the death penalty in Montana with life without the possibility of parole.

Sincerely,

*(Handwritten signatures of Tony Belcourt, Lila Evans, Carolyn Pease-Lopez, Shannon Augare, Sharon Stewart-Peregoy, and Frank Smith)*

EXHIBIT 3  
DATE 3/18/2011  
SB 185